



FORTY WEEKS



THE WHOLE-LIFE CONFESSION SERVICE

Details for Hosting a Whole-Life Reconciliation Service

Here are some elements to consider when hosting a Whole-Life Reconciliation service at your parish or center.

Ratio of Priests to People —When we offered our services in the Archdiocese of Seattle, we held individual services in each of the six parishes participating in the research/ beta project. Every pastor participated in his own service and many of these pastors also participated in the services at the other parishes. It is recommended to limit the service to two hours.

To accomplish this, we sought to have one priest for every ten persons who would be present to make a Whole-Life Confession. Since the program instructs participants to write out their confession and to limit the written confession to 1000 words or less, it takes about 10-15 minutes per person for each individual

confession. Therefore, plan on having one priest for every 10-12 penitents if you run a two hour service. If you lengthen the service, you can double the number of penitents per priest.

Face to Face & Anonymous—It is best that each of the priests be available for confession *both* face-to-face *and* anonymously. This can be achieved by setting a prie dieu behind the priest's chair and also setting a chair in front of the priest. If there are not a sufficient number of prie dieus, a chair or a simple kneeler could be set up behind the priest. Some parishes may have Reconciliation Rooms that can accomplish this dual method, but it is best to make the option available (if possible) for *each* priest to hear confessions face-to-face or anonymously.

Privacy—St. Ignatius urged those praying during a retreat to go to a private place where they would have the freedom to engage in prayer without worrying about others. Confessions will be written out and read by the penitents. It is vital that those making a confession feel comfortable enough to clearly read their letters aloud and to express emotions should they be so moved. Although it may not be possible to have enclosed rooms for each priest, it is important to strive for audio and visual isolation for the priests and penitents.

Order of the Service—It is best to keep the service and opening remarks simple and brief. Focus instead on the one-on-one confession time. Because individuals have been preparing for this confession for 12 weeks, a lengthy introduction and/or examination of conscience is not necessary.

Here is a possible template for a simple Service of the Word ahead of the individual confessions:

- ✘ Give some short introductory remarks to explain the service.

- ✘ Offer an Opening Prayer.

- ✘ Read Gospel Passage Jn 20: 20-30.

- ✘ Offer a very simple word of encouragement and then explain the mechanics of the service. Encourage people to “be not afraid.”

- ✘ Have your bishop write a short letter of encouragement, to be read after the Gospel passage. We have included at the end of this section the letter Archbishop Sartain (Archdiocese of Seattle) wrote for our six beta-project parish services. If multiple parishes are doing the *Forty Weeks* program, the local ordinary can write a unique letter that is addressed to each individual parish, or write a general letter for all parishes.

- ✘ Purchase a very simple small wood crucifix or cross for each penitent or order the Sacred Story Cross. For our beta-project, I bought small olive wood rosary-kit crucifixes (made in the Holy Land; they were about \$0.50 each ordered in bulk via a rosary supply company).

- ✘ The Sacred Story Cross can also be useful, as it reminds people of both the Ten Commandments and the five movements of *Sacred Story Prayer*: Creation, Presence, Memory, Mercy and Eternity (for ordering details, see our website [<http://store.sacredstory.net>])

- ✘ Put all the crucifixes on a small table at the head of the sanctuary. Have the crucifixes blessed and ask each participant to take one before going to confession. It is amazing how such a simple symbol takes on so much meaning. Remember, participants have been preparing for this confession for three months. Many of the 180 people who made a Whole-Life Confession in our research beta-project have carried those crosses with them since that service.

- ✘ Encourage participants to stay until everyone has gone to confession. Ask that, if their schedules allow, they pray for themselves and for those attending this service and all other Whole-Life Confessions that may be taking place in other parishes.

- ✘ Use either recorded or live music during the service. It should be gentle and reflective. If you have musicians who can provide this ministry, this is preferable.

Transcending Difficulties That May Arise

As participants approach the experience of the Whole-Life Confession, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. Here are some of the most important challenges and possible solutions:

- ✘ *Someone missed the parish Whole-Life Confession service.*

Have them arrange an alternate service with a parish/priest willing to help. Or more simply, you can find a priest who will hear your Whole-Life Confession. **The priest need not be familiar with *Forty Weeks* for this to be a positive experience!**

This appointment will consist of them reading their letter to Jesus (no more than 20 minutes) and receiving sacramental absolution. Remember the instructions from Week 12. Simply explain to the priest that you are going through a prayer-renewal program oriented around the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, and that the first twelve weeks of prayer have focused on opening your life-history to the healing of Jesus the Divine Physician.

✠ *What if an individual does not want to go to their parish priest for their Whole-Life Confession?*¹

This is why it is helpful to bring in other priests for the service at your parish. Remember, individuals should also be able to receive the Sacrament anonymously so make sure to set up your service where this is possible.

So, be not afraid to ASK the Spirit for help!

¹ Fr. Watson makes a 4-hour trip each direction every month to see his confessor/spiritual director. This is an important event! Think of it as a pilgrimage, and seek out a priest for this occasion. Yes, priests are busy but you would be surprised how many priests are renewed by hearing a heartfelt confession. You are not only arranging a unique Whole-Life Confession, you are also laying the foundation for a habit of monthly confession (and possibly finding a good confessor for life who can help you grow in your relationship with Christ). The Holy Spirit will assist you to make a commitment for monthly Confession with a regular confessor. Remember:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. (Mt 7: 7-11)

✠ *What if it is not possible for me to finish my Whole-Life Confession letter?*

Take the time you need to get it done, keep going, and eventually you will finish it. Remember you are not climbing Mt. Everest; just writing a letter to Jesus.

What if it is not possible for me to make a sacramental Whole-Life Confession?

- ✠ First, it will always be possible to make a Whole-Life Confession. It may take a bit more time and effort, but you will be able to do this. In the time before the actual event, remember that the exercise of writing the letter to Jesus is your preparation. The Lord—the Divine Physician—will lead you to the priest who can assist with the sacrament of Reconciliation.
- ✠ Second, if you are not able to complete the experience by bringing it to sacramental reconciliation until later after Week 13, do not despair! Keep moving forward with the lessons of *Forty Weeks*. You will be amazed at how the work of Weeks 1-13 will continue to bear fruit in the later lessons!
- ✠ Finally, it is worth remembering that in Fr. Watson’s doctoral research which helped form *Forty Weeks*, a number of non-Catholic Christians participated in this “Whole-Life Confession” exercise. Because they could not have the sacramental experience, many of them simply read the letter to a friend or fellow participant. This may be an alternative for you until you are able to receive sacramental absolution when the Lord does bring the priest into your life.

A Few Things to Remember Overall

- ✘ Encourage participants to take personal responsibility for their own spiritual growth! Don't let action or inaction be dictated by what may or may not be happening in one's faith community. The Whole-Life Confession is an important moment and a major opportunity to take ownership of one's spiritual life. It may take some work to arrange an experience of sacramental Whole-Life Confession – do not let that deter you! We always stretch ourselves for things in our lives that are important. Nothing is more valuable or more important than our relationship with Christ, the Divine Physician, who seeks to heal us so that our lives bear fruit that endures to eternity.
- ✘ Finally, realize that no experience is ever “perfect” and no priest or confession experience is perfect either. As with all things in our lives, the Lord takes what is imperfect and makes it perfect *eventually*, using the imperfect for our growth in His love. So be open to the action of the Spirit, even in the less-than-perfect circumstances of life!